

TOM LIGHTSEY

SUMMARY: Captain Tom Lightsey talks to Pat Jasper about his long career as a Houston Pilot. His journey from Biloxi, MS to the Northeast and then as a pilot to Houston, TX. His long career allowed him to see the world, learn new languages and grow through the ranks. Talks about "incidents", working during holidays as a pilot, how the pilots business is a closed shop and some of the challenges he faced during his long career.

SEPT 27, 2011. Home of Tom Lightsey.

0:00:28

Thomas Nolan Lightsey Jr. Born in Biloxi, MS June 22, 1923. Went to school and graduated from high school in 1942. Joined the merchant marine and went to boot camp in 1943. Suffered from asthma but did not tell merchant marine employers about it. Passed the physical and went to boot camp in Florida for three months. Caught first tanker in June, 1943.

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Merchant Marine is not a fighting organization, but deliver all the products all over the world. First tanker had diesel fuel to the Tanga islands submarines. At the end of WW 2 was on a tanker with aviation gasoline for the navy planes on their way to Japan. Role in the beginning was ordinary seamen, lowest position in the deck department. Got promoted to able seamen. After 18 months qualified to go to officer school, went to Maritime Officers school in Connecticut. Graduated with third mates license in May 1945. Then got on a tanker and went to the South Pacific.

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Raised in Biloxi, after depression. Was poor student in school. After war, everyone went back to college. Loved being a third mate, stayed on ship. Four years later, made captain. Process - captain, chief mate (exec officer), Second mate (navigating officer), third mate, have to spend at least a year before rising through the ranks again. During the war, promotions were given out in six months. Had masters license at 26. Stayed in the Merchant Marine till became a Houston Pilot. 11 months trip out in the Persian Gulf to China and Italy. Enjoyed seeing the world. Became chief mate when company acquired three new ships. 50-60 ships, chosen to be chief major under construction of brand new chemical ships. Carried highly volatile cargo, styrene, benzene, xylene etc. Could cause cancer if you breathe it in. Have led a charmed life.

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Move from 3rd mate to 2nd mate and the 2nd mate is a navigator. Need to layout the charts for the course over the next 24 hours. Was a poor student in school, so had to study

that much harder for next upgrade in license. "Mentors" on board ships taught Morse Code and Semaphore which helped in getting the upgrade in license. People were glad to help. Enjoyed every position.
Being a pilot is very different.

0:13:00

Pilots own their own business and make the rules. Dispatcher receives the call. On for 15 days and off for 15 days. While on call, cannot socialize. Either working or sleeping. Pilot boat goes alongside the ship, pilot climbs a Jacob ladder up to the main deck and a mate escorts him up to the bridge. After introductions and knowing the particulars, pilot is then in command, makes all the decisions.
safety is very important.

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Channel is only 400 ft wide. Depending on the length, breadth and draft of ship, a certain speed needs to be determined to stop. Depending on how deep the ship is - the more water it displaces as it comes closer to the bank. When two ships meet it called Texas Chicken. Bank forces the ship back to the center of the channel. Channel is much wider now.

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Had a collision with another pilot at 2am. Ripped a hole that was 30 ft in the side of the ship. Was a ground boy before that. Memory that lasts a lifetime. Another incident, not so bad. Call them incidents instead of collisions.

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Often go on ships not knowing who the captain is. Would meet for the first time. Had a cheat-book with questions in a language the captain was familiar with. That way could talk to him directly and did not need an interpreter. Captain would like that extra touch.

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Nowadays have to have a marine background to be a pilot. Half blue water men and half brown water men. Half steam ship people and half two boat people. Three year apprentice program.

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Houston to be one of the most dangerous ship channels in the world. Pilots have a closed shop. No competition. Commission from the state of Texas, every port has to have pilots. It is good living and it is top of the Marine profession to become a pilot. Port commission is the Pilot Commission. They set the rate for raise, increase etc.

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Getting into the Port commission is very difficult. Can have a lot of credentials but very few are chosen. Was the 53rd pilot since its inception in Houston. Very closed organization. Need to have friends in the commission. Wanted to be a pilot because it was less traveling and as a family man wanted to exercise that option.

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Wife's sister had married a man from Boston, so she moved to Boston. In 1947, were home at the same time. Married in Biloxi. Was running offshore and moved up to New Jersey. Had two children there. While trying to be a pilot, moved from New Jersey to Pasadena. Had six children. Got another job as an investor. Cruises with family.

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Worked on tankers for the whole career, sacrificed safety for pleasure. Company had chemical ships initially. Worked on those too.

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Merchant Marine is a private company. After the war, the companies took their ships back from the Maritime association. Worked with Keystone. Rose through the ranks. Had the best of both worlds. Married the same woman, had the best job.

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Liberty ship - ships that were built in WW 2 to make trips to carry goods. Ugly and small and quite a few were built, slow ships. At sea from 1946 -1953.

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Background from ship or tug does not make that much of a difference. The person's personal skills counts. Test of fortitude. Now people have to have a maritime degree through a 4 year course.

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Liberty company offered a job, NJ was too cold. Reason behind moving to Houston. Was operating a new chemical tanker. Would come back every 10-12 days to Houston. When wanted to leave the North East, made a list of the 27 pilots and found out their hobbies. Would talk to the pilots for hours. Had studied their hobbies.

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Shifted close to Deer Park. Bought a lot in 1958 and built the house.

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Would take various products from the Shell refinery and bring it to various distribution centers on the east coast. Pilots own the business and the boats. Have 35 employees. Crews for the boat and Marine Superintendent in Galveston, brand new office in Deer

Park, 8-10 office staff, executive committee makes all the decisions and everyone meets once every 2-3 months. Everyone is equal.

00:49:10

Pool all the money, take the expenses out and what is left is divided equally among the pilots. No seniority system. (Shows a picture and explains)

00:50:31

Now pilots work like gentleman. Earlier used to work like dogs. There was always a ship waiting to be brought in. Have included minority, women. When one job is done, guaranteed 12 hours off. If two ships are handled, guaranteed 18 hours off. Wonderful communication systems. Can tell the depth, what it is, they converse. Safety has improved a great deal. All in constant contact. Port of Houston has a lot of room to expand. Key to progress. Houston has tripled in size.

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Working conditions have improved. Communication - everyone has a laptop to figure out information

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Fog. On from October to April. Safety guidelines in place now. Incidents have greatly reduced.

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If there is an incident, PBRC - Pilot review board used to look into it. Now industry and port get involved. One little incident can be blown out of proportion. Reason behind everyone being so safety conscious.

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Would interact with the different mates. One of the mates worked with the telegraph. Used to communicate with the engine room.

1:00:00

Would get on a different carrier every time. Ranged from a tug boat to a loaded super tanker, car carrier, barge etc. Did not make any difference. If the boat wanted to come into Houston, would bring it in. Big sea going tugs and barges were a whole different genre to learn to operate. No experience in that.

1:02:34

Quit being on the sea to spend more time with family but as a pilot had to work holidays. Christmas, holidays, birthdays, anniversaries. One Christmas went to work at 2 am and son in law is a Marine Colonel. It is all about mind over matter. Did not like it but had to do it. Built the house in such a way so could sleep during the day. Jobs used to take 6-8

hours. Now, because of docks down in Bayport and Barber's Cut, can do it in 2-3 hours. Before Loading grain ship out of city docks would entail an 8 hr job. no relaxing till out of the bay. Constantly changing course and the speed of the ship. Worked for 15 days and off for 15 days. Pilots own the business. so preferred to work like dogs instead of hiring a lot more and splitting the money.

1:07:57

Pilot room. To lay down and rest. Got so tired of eating fish heads and rice. Was not much into eating Sushi but that was what was available on Oriental ships.

1:09:50

Hidden parts of the channel. As Presiding Officer, any new Dock had to be 225 ft from the near bottom edge of the channel. Before that docks were built right on the edge of the channel. Surge from the ship approaching the channel can break the ship lose. Have to stop and drift by. When docks were built with the new regulation, could have more speed without tearing the ship away from the dock. Was really proud of the achievement. Turnin Basin out in Brady island. Got the space to officially turn the big car carriers etc. Did a few things that was very proud of while was Presiding Officer. Was on the review committee to discipline pilots and did not like that.

1:12:11

If a pilot has an incident, he has to go before 2 groups and the presiding officer and explain his side of the story. The committee would decide on the disciplinary action to take. Had this one pilot who was constantly having problems. Lot of damage. Was a strong disciplinarian.

1:13:45

Review board had two groups. White hats and black hats. Knew everyone's capabilities as work with someone constantly for 15 days. Terminology - nicknames. Used to teach down at Galveston College. Used to teach Bridge Resource Management, how to conduct a watch on the bridge. Used to tell students, "looking at the best ship pilot you have ever seen." Used to be able to answer any questions related to the ship.

1:18:10

Battleship Texas. Could get it out of the mud. There was a big crowd gathered there. Had shut the whole channel down. Said later, "The Japanese couldn't sink the Texas, the Germans couldn't sink the Texas, looks like the timelines (?) are going to sink the Texas." as a Pilot, brought in one of the biggest ships into the channel. National Defender - large tanker that was to load grain. Brought it in with another Captain. Took up all the turning basin. Just couldn't turn it. Big challenge. Took a little bit more of expertise. Was a challenge. Tag teaming. Total concentration. Get too tired. It is safer this way. Was raised

on the water but other than sailing, did not have much exposure to the water. Retired in 1993. Improving almost constantly. Send pilots to school.